

A Poetic Horror Story

By Tennessee Williams

By WALTER KERR

The critic Lessing once pointed out that if a playwright has something monstrous and improbable to say, the best way to go about saying it is to start at the beginning in a small casual truth, then slowly and patiently add other small, casual truths until a thousand quite natural steps lead finally to the holocaust.

That is just about what Tennessee Williams has done in the longer and more important of his two recently produced plays, "Suddenly Last Summer." (The two are offered together at the off-Broadway York Playhouse under the title of "Garden District.")

Flesh-Eating Image

Mr. Williams is moving, with quiet and elusive determination, toward an image of pure horror: the horror is not simply in the literal, flesh-eating facts of the case, but in the ultimate implication that these special facts constitute the whole truth about the universe. Early in the piece a family gathers to see if it can unearth, and then perhaps suppress, the scandalous details of a middle-aged and rather rarefied poet's death. Before much else has been said, the poet's preoccupation with a cannibalistic view of the human condition is made clear: he has once seen, on a volcanic shore, the savage descent of thousands of birds of prey upon a community of scrambling, panicky new-born

turtles; he has watched carnivorous beaks turn the turtles over and hack at their soft, exposed vitals; he has decided that he has seen God.

Thereafter he becomes conscious of a destination; it is the special mission of his girl companion, a cousin, to "keep him from completing his image of self-sacrifice to a horrible god." In the end, the sacrifice is completed—on the same shrieking and clawing terms—not at the edge of a volcanic beach but in the bright sunlight of a very white street in the middle of our own civilization. Mr. Williams is aware that we are not apt to go willingly with him to the site of his private apocalypse ("nobody on earth could possibly believe it," he has one of his characters say), but he is concerned that every ounce of his skill shall go into the effort of taking us there.

Control

The resources he has summoned up are extraordinary; we join him on the journey with absolute attention and breath-taking theatrical suspense—at least to within inches of the end of it. This is the playwright's most disciplined, immaculately controlled work in some five or six years, and the discipline is evident in the subtlety and sureness of the most trivial touch of character-drawing from the rise of the curtain.

There is, for instance, a sober,

candid, unshakably intelligent doctor (exceptionally well played by Robert Lansing) who is able to spot, and pin down, a lie the minute it is told. Offered a handsome, silkily phrased bribe that will aid him in his work, he cuts through to the corrupt core of the issue with calm, devastating directness. We swiftly come to feel that whatever this man can be persuaded to believe, we must believe, too.

Terror Must Wait

There is an arrogant, semi-paralyzed mother who will defend her son's reputation at any cost: even at the cost of willfully destroying the mind of the girl who watched him come to his self-destined end. But this mother, capably realized in Hortense Alden's performance, is no mere story-book tyrant making conventionally forbidding gestures. She has humor ("Isn't it kind of the drugstore to keep me alive?"), she belongs wholly to the everyday world of agreeable social forms (even terror must wait while she has her five o'clock daiquiri), and she is honest about her various dishonesties. She is a woman of considered, orderly purpose: the fact that she wishes to conceal a disturbing event convinces us that the event is worth knowing about—and we listen.

There is the girl-companion herself, a trapped animal with a secret—restless and fright-
Continued on page 4, column 1

Theater: A Poetic Horror Story

(Continued from page one)

ened but rigidly courageous in the person of Anne Meacham. Snatching a cigarette she shouldn't have ("All right, I'll pay for it later!"), laughing like an insane sea-gull at every hint of family greed, forcing out her words past a kind of psychological lockjaw, she slowly takes on the authority of Cassandra. Because she is transparently damaged, even doomed, by the knowledge she possesses, because she has no hope at all that her story will be credited, because its prophetic recital can only involve her in intense and useless agony, every sentence she utters takes on reluctant meaning. The grudging surrender of truth makes us want it all the more.

Though Mr. Williams has added other, more mechanical devices to help convince us we are on the track of something actual (the girl is given a truth serum before she begins her last, long, tortured revelation), the essential conviction that binds us to the search comes from the incidental accuracies of personal behavior, from the straightforward and starkly vivid use of language, from the frank recognition that this is the way genuine people would behave in the face of a fantastic, soul-shattering vision. Superb is the word for this craftsmanship.

Less can be said for the vision itself, laid open at last. At the precise moment of its disclosure there is a feeling not so much of shock as of vague collapse, as though the air were starting

to go out of a frighteningly grotesque carnival balloon. The feeling is not, I think, entirely due to the philosophic savagery of Mr. Williams' world-view; even though one may refuse to share a playwright's pessimism after some reflection, it is still possible to give that pessimism some kind of theatrical assent at the moment of climax, to accept it—at the very least—as the right particular ending for the particular things that were begun.

A Final Symbol

The root difficulty, it seems to me, lies in the author's inability—demonstrated over several recent plays—to find a concrete, earthy, flesh-and-bone situation in which to clothe his ultimate thought. Once more he slips from the fullness of people to the comparative vacancy of a symbol. The last thing that happens in the play is forced

upon Mr. Williams' characters, not fed by them; it comes not as a surge of the blood but as a bolt from the blue.

Perhaps the image itself is not true, and there is no appropriate human face for it to wear; perhaps Mr. Williams has simply not yet discovered its bone-structure. In either case the problem remains: a miraculously sustained reality bumps head-on into a last-minute artifice. But see the play.

"Something Unspoken," which opens the bill, is a mildly interesting examination of an undefined relationship between two women. The New Orleans settings for both plays have been devised, most effectively, by Robert Soule, and Herbert Machiz' direction of the hypnotically exciting second play is a marvel of artfully prolonged tension.

What America Is Seeing

Here are the ten most popular movies of the week, according to a nation-wide "Variety" box-office survey.

Titles	Weeks On List
1. Sayonara	2
2. Peyton Place.....	2
3. Around the World in 80 Days.....	48
4. Don't Go Near the Water.....	2
5. Raintree County.....	2
6. Legend of the Lost.....	3
7. Seven Wonders of the World.....	81
8. Old Yeller.....	2
9. Tarnished Angels.....	1
10. Search for Paradise.....	10